

The five-county area, Irion and Crockett being my base, showed one million six hundred thousand ewes in 1940. Nowadays they think there might be 200,000 head.

It's going to be hard to keep count of the woolies, as herders, even with the decent lamb prices, can't fight the predators.

My son, Ralph, called last night to report he found a hog hole in a year-old 12.5 gauge, six-inch net fence with barb reinforcement broken at two feet off the ground. Now, this wasn't a social call this boar made though our new fence.

We can't stock sheep anymore because of coyotes and bobcats, but running cattle with hawks languishing in your water troughs and knocking down any fence or gate is a good way to encourage retirement.

All kinds of dreadful stories drift in, like a hobbyist south of 09 Divide turning out 200 hawks to hunt. How the hawks spread over into ranches at lambing times to kill the lambs and the ewes.

The Big Boss trained his hands to work hawks. He kept anywhere from one to two hundred head around the ranch and out in the railroad right-of-way. We marked squealing pigs

with long-snouted mothers surrounding the pen, daring us to step outside, several times a year.

He thought about these destructive pests once a year at his big sausage party after the first frost. Buddies came from all over the shortgrass country to watch us hands kill, dress, and grind meat the way Grandfather once put up his winter meat.

The antiquated process involved one barrel of boiling ash water buried slantwise in a fire pit for two men to scald a big shoat, strung on a block and tackle, until the hair slipped away.

In 1950, there might have been a tribe left deep on the Congo dressing musk hogs in that fashion. The faraway Congo may or may not have been a case, but distant distilleries in Scotland and Kentucky sure profited and contributed to the spectators' enjoyment.

After a long life, I have never seen a look on a fellow man's face to match being stooped over face to face, turning a 250-pound mass by the hind legs in a barrel of boiling ash water while merrymakers paraded around the grounds.

Two African cooks heated the water on a flared gas burner. The stove made the only concession to modern times.

"By Gawd, we used to have to heat water with mesquite wood to kill hawgs when I was a kid," the Big Boss said.

But this hawg herd only left the ranch a time or two, once through Mrs. Coates's chicken yard at Mertzon after a flood, and one dry fall in a migration up to the Henderson ranch nine miles to the west. (I think told you we drove those hawgs back on horseback.)

But don't be mislead to think we neglected the neighbors. The Big Boss gave away hawgs. He was most forgiving of two brothers who always stole their winter meat from the Noelke right-of way when they finished helping work in the fall.

The hawgs finally overstepped. They caught one of the Boss's Thoroughbred mares down foaling and chewed off her tail. The devils killed the colt before the mother could arise.

Twenty-four hours later, the Big Boss sold his hawgs at a big dance in Sonora, Texas, f.o.b. Noelke Switch. Under his orders, next morning I was instructed to hire a crew to gather every hawg off the ranch. In three weeks we delivered the last hawgs, down to the last bristle.

Today the helicopter pilot down on Spring Creek between Mertzon and Angelo knows how to herd hawgs into openings for disposal. Son Lea close to Llano says the wild

ones down there are 10 times harder to hunt than deer. He claims they are careful where and when they water.

Favorable reports come of late that the prairie wolves are now fast becoming town wolves or city coyotes. News comes from Port Aransas, Texas on Mustang Island, that a coyote attacked a Chihuahua dawg while the lady held the leash. My son Ben said the weekend he fished in Port A, a coyote bit a couple of hombres asleep on the beach, indisposed by beverage refreshments.

Note too, please, that standards are too high in this work to comment on the Chihuahua dawg incident. Mark down somewhere, however, that it may be okay for Mr. Coyote to kill Jackie and Gary Tankersley's lambs out here in Irion County, but you better reconsider lap dawgs for prey among the city folks.

The fence the hawg went through was the first string of new fence built on my maternal grandfather's lands since 1903, or 106 years ago. Hawg hunting better be grand sport to compensate for what they are going cost us herders.